

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS AT LOWELL
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**SHIFTING GEARS PROJECT
VERMONT**

INFORMANT: CORA BARDWELL

INTERVIEWER: LINDA MORLEY

DATE: OCTOBER 1, 1988

M = LINDA MORLEY

B = CORA BARDWELL

M: All right, my name is Linda Morley. I'm interviewing Cora Bardwell. This is the first of October. We're at the Heritage State Park in Holyoke, Massachusetts. This interview is for the Shifting Gears Program, and it's an interview on work and work history. And we've asked Cora Bardwell to come and be interviewed because her work has not been standard workplace work. But it has been legitimate work that women have done, perhaps some men have done some of the work you've done, in the history of this part of the country. I just want to clarify, it's the first of October, but the year is 1988, [chuckles] of the Shifting Gears Program. And this is part of the Massachusetts Folklife Festival. The first such festival. Cora Bardwell is at the festival as a participant artist, has been demonstrating the crafts, the work of family in the household. Some um work I guess that's unpaid, but which provides necess-, necessities that no longer have to be paid for because they're made, is that right. So that's what Cora is doing here. Cora, can you tell us y-, u-, very briefly, where you're from, um where you grew up, um what your family's situation was in growing up.

B: Grew, I grew up in Westover, Vermont. Um, with six sisters and three brothers and my mother. My father died when I was quite young. And uh [pause: 3 sec.] well, just grew up, went to a one-room school. And uh when I was out of elementary school went to high school in the nearby town of Townsend, Vermont. And uh after high school I, well, through the years of high school, before I went to high school even, I was uh doing what I would call chores for neighbors, and uh getting paid for it. So I always worked to earn money, because there was very little money, cash money, in the house.

M: So i-in, but in your family you had um, you learned many skills that really prepared you for the work place, is that not right?

B: Well, because there was a large family we all had to work. We each had eh our own little thing to do.

M: What was the division of labor in your family? Was there girls' work and boys' work?

B: It was all boys' and girls' work. And if you, if you were a girl you were doing girls' work, and you were doing boys' work. And if you were a boy you had to do girls' work, too, if that's what you wanted to separate it. The work had to be done and all of us had to do it. Uh we took turns doing different things. Uh two of us made beds in the morning, two of us washed dishes through the day. You didn't, wasn't the same two. My mother assigned us to which ones would do the dishes, and which ones would make the beds, and which one swept the floors, and which one did the barn chores which was uh milking and uh feeding the chickens and turkeys and bringing the wood in and so forth.

M: How about the clothing?

B: Well, my mother pretty much did the laundry. We hung the clothes up, the ones that were old enough to reach the clothesline. And uh, but she did the laundry.

M: How about the making of clothing?

B: My mother made the clothes. (M: Um hm) As we got older we did the sewing, children.

M: All the children?

B: Yes.

M: Including the boys?

B: [sounding slightly indignant] Yes!

M: And then how about uh, I, y-, I remember speaking with you, you mentioned that there were certain chores that your grandmother did because your mother was too busy.

B: Well, my mother used to uh, we used to get dried apples from my grandmother [chuckles] and uh she always dried the apples for us, I remember that. And she always uh, uh made the soap for us, and uh she knitted because my mother couldn't keep up with the knitting. And uh she did lots of sewing for us, too, my grandmother.

M: All right now, uh you had said there was not very much cash in the family, so that were there other kinds of activities that normally people had to have paid uh money to others to do? Like uh maybe repair technical things. Were those also things that you learned at home? Maybe uh mending wagons. Were you still using wagons in your childhood? Or were you (B: No) using (B: No) automobiles?

B: We uh, we just had the, the milk cows, um for our butter and, and milk and cheese.

M: What about transportation? What did you use for transportation?

B: Well, my grandfather gave us transportation, horse and buggy. (M: Um hm) We were, if

it was something we needed to have.

M: And suppose that had to be repaired?

B: They took care of that. They maintained the, like (- -)

M: At home?

B: Yes. My father's brothers uh maintained the uh transportation of the horse and buggy whenever we needed it. (M: Um hm) If we had to go to town for other than the neighborhood grocery store, uh they would get whatever we needed; or it would come in by the mail. (M: I see) In on this mail.

M: Mail train. On the mail s-stage or (- -)

B: Well it was a stage, mail stage, came in.

M: Well I think it was, is useful in your case to, to talk a little bit about the activities in the family, to get some sense of why you felt comfortable and competent to do some of the kind of jobs that you had in your uh older years, your older childhood and in your adult life. Uh you said some of the chores you would do for neighbors, uh wh-, at what point do you think of yourself as having gone to work?

B: Well I think I went to work probably at twelve years old, thereabouts. And uh, and I had a, a job that would be called mother's helper today. Uh because I used to work in the, in the uh home um washing dishes, sweeping, dusting and uh making beds. Anything that uh, that was my first what I would consider my first job eh for summer time.

M: And would these be people who would move into the town for the summer?

B: Yeah, they were, they were people who came there to spend their summer vacations. (M: Um hm) From (- -)

M: Did you ever work with them back in their homes? In their home towns? Where they came from? During the winter? Did you ever go back and (- -)

B: Not, not any of that I worked for in the summer, no. (M: Uh huh) They, they lived too far away. (M: Uh huh) They lived [free], ou-out of the, in the cities, they lived. (M: Um hm)

M: Okay. And then how, what was your next stage of work after the back-, household mother's helper?

B: Well, as I graduated from mother's helper [chuckling], I became more or less of a, a homemaker I would say. I, I took over uh more serious duties of, of uh being on my own to, to do the uh housework, of planning meals and coo-, I mean clearing out the plans for the meals, helping to plan meals. I did no shopping, no, no (M: Would you do this for (- -)) shopping in the

store.

M: (- -) uh neighbors? And (- -)

B: Uh this was for the same people who, who came in to uh spend their summers.

M: And where were you doing this work?

B: Right in, in the town. (M: Westover) Westover, yes.

M: Okay. And uh how many years did you do that?

B: Well, as I was going through high school because in the years that I went to high school I was too busy to be doing that sort of thing.

M: During the winter?

B: [clears throat] Yes. (M: Okay)

M: Now what about after [Mrs. Bardwell clears throat] high school? What kind of work did you, you try different sorts of things trying to figure out what you wanted to do with your life?

B: Well not really because I had found that I liked the house, staying in the house, doing the housework, and it was, it was something that I knew how to do and liked to do. (M: Um hm; all right now (- -)) Like to say I was good at it but I don't think I was. [laughs] I never (- -)

M: Well what was it like? How, what, can you give us any uh examples, maybe from memory of, of, of incidents that illustrate what the work was like? Interaction between yourself and your employer for instance? Who, who did the hiring and (B: Oh) what was your (- -)

B: Uh people would, would uh ask locally in the, in the store or post office uh for, if there was anybody available and uh through word of mouth like that they would come to see if they could get anybody. Uh having six sisters everybody worked, (M: Um hm) and uh as I grew up [chuckles] I became an older oh uh, and more mature helper I suppose that would (M: Um hm) be the way I got it. And they mi-, they'd ask for me for next year, (M: Um hm) and uh (- -)

M: They'd reserve you.

B: Well, no when they (M: Is that what you meant?) came tha-, when they came in the s-, in the uh summer they would want, looking for somebody to keep their house going and uh as my oldest sister branched out into some other, or got married or something, had her own home, uh there'd be another one to take her place. [both chuckle] (M: Okay) That's the way we, that's how I, I became more uh involved in working.

M: For how long did you do this, wh-, h-, what would you call this um still homemaking and (B: Housework) housework? (B: Yes)

M: For how long did you do that?

B: Well, after I was out of high school, [pauses] I guess until I was married. (M: Um hm)

M: And how l-, many years was that between high school and marriage?

B: [pause: 3 sec.] I don't know. Uh (- -)

M: Was it ten years or less?

B: Less. [Oh. Oh. Yeah]

M: Eight years or so? (B: Yeah) Okay. So [both talk; unintelligible] what uh five, five years? Now was this housework done all in Westover? Or did you (B: Uh, no) go to surrounding areas?

B: Um I worked, I worked for uh friends of my mother's, [clears throat] uh one summer and uh they graduated from what is now Yankee, uh Rowe Yankee plant, to Brooklyn, New York. (M: Uh hah) And when, when they went to Brooklyn, New York, I had pleased them well enough so that they recommended me to some friends in, in Brooklyn, New York. And that was my first trip so to speak out of town. [chuckles] And uh that was eh, I think that was the first trip I had out of town. My mother didn't want me to go. It took me about two weeks of telling her that I was going [chuckles] before I went, and she just thought it was too far away for me to go. And uh (M: Okay) being a young girl out of, out of eh the country, not having any experience and going into New York City which was a real thing, and then to Brooklyn, New York which was another real thing. But uh, uh I had confidence enough in the, in the people that I had worked for. I knew they would never recommend anything that, that wasn't suitable for me. (M: Uh huh)

M: What kinds of adjustments was, were there in the, in the work, being in the city as, versus being in the country. How did that differ?

B: A small apartment in (M: Huh) the city.

M: Where did you live?

B: Seventy-seventh Street and Seventh Avenue. [laughs]

M: Uh hah, so that's, and, and um, what were your accommodations like in this apartment?

B: I had a, my own room. And uh just kept uh house. I guess there was, it was a small apartment, I can't remember now exactly what we had.

M: Were there children in the family?

B: No. No.

M: What were your duties?

B: Just to k-, g-, I did the shopping there entirely. (M: Um hm) I had an allowance and, and uh so I did all the shopping. There was never any limit on the allowance. There's money, always cash money there to go down and (- -) I planned the meals.

M: S-, ab-, so every day you, you cleaned and cooked. (B: Yes) Okay. Um, h-, and then you got married. (B: No) No?

B: This was one winter that I did that. As soon as I earned money enough to get on the bus and go home for a weekend, I did. I went home for the weekend. It was very different for me. I was very homesick, but I liked it. But I liked home better. So I would go home. This was through the winter. [coughs] Excuse me. This was through the winter time that I was doing this work in Brooklyn, New York. Because home, in the summer there was plenty of work. And uh I wanted to be out doing the work and being at home in the summer. So I did this one winter. [clears throat] I got lots of experience because the people I worked for [clears throat] and my friends who had recommended me uh came and took me places, around the city. And uh, so I enjoyed that. And every afternoon after lunch, I don't mean every afternoon, but after lunch uh until it was time to get dinner, I took my nickel and went to the, to the uh sss-, subway; and went to Coney Island. It was the most fascinating thing I ever did. I was born you don't speak to people and you don't talk to people. But being in the country I knew everybody and I talked to everybody. And so I did it Brooklyn, New York and at Coney Island. And I met the most fascinating people. Uhh it was the most wonderful experience for me!

M: Can you give us an incident that comes back? That's memorable?

B: Not, not any one incident. But I just stopped to talk to everybody like they were the family back home and the people in the town.

M: And you found similar response?

B: Oh yes. (M: This is what I (- -) They, they knew, they knew where I was coming from and I didn't care where they were coming from just so long as they talked to me and were interesting me to talk about different things and all. I really enjoyed it thoroughly.

M: Then why did you never go back after that one winter?

B: Well, I got, um, I was, I was eh home, I didn't go to Brooklyn after that one winter. I went to New York City. (M: Uh huh) I worked at First Avenue, and uh (- -)

M: Also as a domestic?

B: Yes. (M: Um hm) First Avenue. And it was Mitchell Place that I worked. Ten Mitchell Place, which was fabulous! I worked for two single uh ladies who were, uh, one was a, um, a

writer; she was an author. And the other one was a school teacher and she taught at the Little Red Schoolhouse in New York City. And they were, they were really wonderful to me. My sister had worked there the previous year and gone to school. She went to Wilford Academy in, in uh, in uh New York City. And uh, she liked, she took the hairdressing course and uh when she came home she wasn't happy with that, so she went to Vermont University to uh college. Became a school teacher. She (- -)

M: Which sister was this?

B: This was Ethel. M- two younger sisters went there. E-uh, the younger sister was there already, and Ethel went and joined her. So the two of them were together.

M: So Ethel and (- -)

B: And Rebecca. They went through high school together, and so they went through college together. The same two.

M: And they both worked for these women?

B: No. (M: No) No, just Ethel. And uh, she had worked previously. so I went down and took her place. And uh I had known the women. Of course they'd been, they had been spending their summers in Dover, so I was well acquainted with them. And I did the same work for them that I had been doing. And uh, I stayed there for uh a few yea-, well for a couple or three years until I got married. (M: Uh huh)

M: Okay. Now, when you got married, you said you did this work until you got married. What was it that uh kept you from continuing this work after you married?

B: I had a family. (M: I see) Raised a family.

M: For how long were you out of the workplace while you were raising your family?

B: Well, I had uh four children. And uh when I got the fourth one into high school, into uh elementary school, I decided that it was time for me to earn a little money on my own. (M: Um hm) So that's when I went to doing uh cooking.

M: [both talk] [In Vermont]. And what kind of places did you cook in?

B: And I went to restroo-, rent-, restaurant work then. (M: Um hm) I got a job doing restaurant cooking.

M: What was the type of restaurant you first worked in?

B: Well I worked in a, in a school, because my sister-in-law had worked there. They needed some help, so I went to work for the uh, well it was the headmaster of Eaglebrook School (M: Um hm) in uh Deerfield. (M: Uh huh) And I worked there, until (- -)

M: What were you doing there? Just cooking?

B: [clears throat] Yes. Just uh, well same, house, housework. Keeping, maintaining the home. And uh, the head of the house became ill and we had to make different arrangements. She got me a job in a restaurant, which was very different from the cooking I was doing.

M: So in the school what was the cooking like?

B: Oh, I worked at the school. I worked for the headmaster at the school, you see. So that was a home. (M: Oh, I see, in his home) In his home, yes.

M: I see. So that g-again was like domestic work. (B: Yes) Okay and then who, h-how was it that you got the job in the restaurant? What, what caused that?

B: She, (M: What (- -)) because she was ill, she called and interviewed different people, and uh told me that it was, I could work at this restaurant. (Um hm) Which I had a job there. [clears throat]

M: Was this the first time you worked outside of someone's home then? When you went to that restaurant?

B: Well, yes. This was the first, but I'd always dealt with food, so that part of it (- -)

M: So you've had, (B: But the (- -)) you had no, you had no [Mrs Bardwell clears her throat] uh doubt that you could do this job?

B: I had, yes I had, well, it was cooking, and uh they said they would train me. Um, it was very different. I had never cooked um lobster. And very little fish. I mean very little experience in that. But I'd never cooked lobster. And she said "Oh, there's nothing to it. I'll show you." So I butchered lobster and made uh [pause: 3 sec.] various other things. Anything that was on the menu. In a nice restaur- (- -)

M: What did you, what did you think about cooking lobster? How did you feel about doing that?

B: Well, I found out that I was allergic to, to uh shellfish at that time, and so I had to be more careful about uh handling the shells? But (- -)

M: So how did that manifest itself?

B: Uh, in a rash. (M: Um hm, [unclear]) Like hives. So I was more careful about how to handle it.

M: What would you do?

B: But I, (M: To (- -)) but I uh (- -)

M: Be more careful?

B: eah, I'd just, you take anything in your stride, you, what comes (- -)

M: Did you, what did you do (- -)

B: What you, you make allowances (- -)

M: Did you use gloves or what?

B: No.

M: No. How did you do, how did you (B: Just (- -)) prevent that reaction?

B: Well, you don't really prevent it. You live with it. (M: I see) You live with it. And uh, I worked there for some time.

M: How many years?

B: I don't remember why I left there. I was trying to think why I left there. [pause: 10 sec.]
Well, I don't remember why I left there. [pause: 3 sec.]

M: Did the restaurant close?

B: No. I think, I just sss-, I just, I just remember having to be home. Um, I can't remember why I left there. [pause: 5 sec.]

M: This was a job that you apparently liked, very much?

B: Yes. (M: Um hm) Yes, it was very good. [both talk] Very good pay.

M: How was it working with a lot of people (B: Um) compared to working on your own?

B: [pause: 3 sec.] Working with a lot of people?

M: Well there's a lot of different people in the, in a restaurant rather than working on your own in a, in (B: There wasn't a) in someone's home. (B: Lot of people in the restaurant) How many were there?

B: I was the only cook.

M: But there were (B: Uh) other (- -)

B: There was waitresses (M: Um hm) there. And uh there was no problem. (M: Um hm) Everybody was very helpful. You helped one ano- (- -) When there was a job to be done, you

saw it was done. If they [saws] I needed help, they did. (M: Um hm) [clears throat] One little incident that's [fun] [chuckles] was the uh, [clears throat] the owner of the restaurant, the Mr. and Mrs. The restaurant had a boy and a girl. And uh they, they grew up in this restaurant. And uh, so they knew the functions of everything. They knew how it functioned. And uh, there was, the garbage man came in and he used to chase the waitresses round and round the uh kitchen and all and (- -) So one day he started cha-, he attempted to chase me around the kitchen and uh, because I was a new girl, and I just didn't know how to handle it, (M: Um hm) because I'd never run into a problem like that before. And I was behind the, my working uh table, and he was on the other side. And, and uh he just said "Well, Cora," he said, "If you live that way," he said, "You'll die that way." And I said "Well I am living this way and not your way." And he said, "Well I'm coming around there anyway." And the little boy, who was not in school yet, he was a, he wasn't old enough for elementary school, he said "Cora, you got your knife there. He won't come behind your [chuckling] table if you tell him that." [both chuckle] So I never, never had any more uh discussion with Teddy about coming behind my table [interviewer laughs] to chase me around the kitchen! But um, e-everybody was very good. I wa-, e-I could have spoke to the manager, the, to the little boy's father, but the little boy knew ho-, how to handle anything. And I said "If he can handle anything at his age, I can, too!" [interviewer laughs] And we never had any problems. But they were very good to me. And uh after the, after I left there, I don't remember why (M: Um hm) I left there, but uh, uh probably it was some crisis in a home, somebody got sick or something. Anyway, I worked there for quite some time. And then I was home.

M: Now, what did you choose to do when you did finally go back to work after whatever it was that took you from that job?

B: The uh, let's see. After I left there, I was trying to think what it was I did. [pause: 5 sec.] Oh, I know why I left there now! My children came out of school in the summertime, and I couldn't work in the summertime with children out of school. [laughing] You never know what children will do when they're left alone you know. So I had to stay home. That's why I left. So when I went back, course they had to hire somebody else. So when they, wh-when I was ready to g-, uh go to work again, I-I, come September, I had to find another place to work. So I uh, went to work in uh, in Greenfield, which is close by. I went to work in another restaurant, and uh I stayed there for some time. Uh, as a matter of fact I was there until I became pregnant from my fifth child!

M: The unexpected family, [Mrs. Bardwell laughs] huh? (B: Yes) What do they call that in your part of the world?

B: Uhh, the [rowing] crop it's called. [interviewer laughs] And after that uh, I, I worked until uh, right up until he was born and then uh, I took off (- -) I was working a night shift. I worked from three until uh, three until twelve. Four to twelve. I worked from four to twelve. Ev-. And uh because my children were in school I got out at four o'clock. And uh, uh uh I mean they got out, no I went to work at four. My husband would be coming in as they would be getting off the school bus. So that (- -)

M: So there's always someone there. (B: Yes) To care for them. (B: Yes; That's (- -)) So in

your family it was really important to have somebody with your children at all times. (B: Oh yes) [Very opposed] to that.

B: I couldn't, I couldn't work if they weren't there. And uh so (- -)

M: How did your family feel about your working at all?

B: Well, I don't know as they minded that much, because they had things that they were doing. And uh, so, when uh, when my baby became old enough to go to school, I worked a day shift, and they went to school in the morning and I got home when they were coming off the bus. (M: Uh huh)

M: Now (B: So that took care of that) how about the remuneration of these jobs? Were these good paying jobs in your estimation?

B: I felt that I was, I always had a better job than any of my neighbors or any of my friends. I was paid better than any of them. Because I demanded that. I, I used to say that [chuckles] I wanted so much, and if it wasn't what I wanted, if they didn't want to pay that, I could find another job because I didn't have to, I had to work, I didn't have to work for anybody I didn't want to or I didn't like or didn't get along with. I knew that I didn't have to. I could wait for another job.

M: Did you ever work for less than you wanted to?

B: [pause: 5 sec.] You're tempting me, Linda.

M: [interviewer laughs] I'm not intending to.

B: One time I asked for more than the, than the family wanted to pay. But I was having to be uh, I had two uh young ladies that I had to, I had to uh get lunch for because their parents would be gone, and I (- -)

M: How old were they?

B: One was about eh six years old. A delightful child! Delightful! She was busy as a bee, bouncing right from the time she was awake in the morning until she was asleep at night. And the other girl was eh older. She was about twelve, thirt-, she's about twelve years old. And the six eh, well she, no she must have been about eight years old. And uh [clears throat] the kind that's getting pushy and smart. But she was, she was not allowed to be a brat really. She was really a delightful child. And I asked them for more money because I thought I was worth more, money. [chuckles] And they hesitated. I said "All right, I'll take the job." Because I knew it was a good job. I knew it was a, a pleasant, pleasantry. So I took the job. And the first week I was there, I thought I was the only one in the house. The children came in for lunch. And uh we had lunch in the kitchen. And the house is all open. It was fall time. And uh they came in from school to eat lunch. And this little, uh the younger girl sat down and she was pushing me to see how, how I would react. And I told her she had to behave at the table. Even if her parents

weren't there, I was there and she had to behave because I didn't like her behavior when I was eating. And uh she gave me another little push about her behavior. And I told her she could go into the dining room and eat because uh her sister and I were not going to sit there and have her misbehave while we had our lunch. We were going to have a nice lunch. She settled right down. There was no more pushing at all after that. And pretty soon I heard the front door slam which was in the other part of eh, it was away from the kitchen but it, as I say the doors were all open and everything. When I collected my paycheck at the end of the week, I got what I had asked for, because the master of the house was in, [chuckles] was in the den, and he had heard the little performance between the girl and I, and uh, approved of what I had said.

M: Did he say anything about it, or (- -)

B: Yes, he mentioned it. He mentioned the fact that he had heard my disciplining of his daughter and approved of it.

M: So that when he handed you the salary he let you know that there was (- -)

B: He let me know that, that he felt that I was worth that, what I was asking.

M: How did you feel about that?

B: Well, I was glad that I had, that I had maintained what I felt was right. Because I didn't want her to misbehave at a table any time. My children didn't. (M: Hm) Well, at that time I didn't have children. At that time I didn't (M: Yeah, um hm) have children. I was single at that time.

M: Now, factory work must have paid quite a bit more than domestic work. Why did you never do factory work or (- -)

B: I don't know whether factory work paid more or not. But I never was interested in going there. I couldn't, couldn't uh do other work. Just, I tried it for one week, and uh I didn't like it and I didn't [pause: 3 sec.] I don't think I, I don't know whether the, the amount of, of uh money was involved or not. But I knew that it wasn't work that I wanted to do. (M: Um hm)

M: Can you explain what it was about that work that you didn't feel c-simpatico with?

B: I don't what it was. I don't know what it was about factory work. But it just wasn't anything that I was interested in.

M: And you had the confidence that you could find work you were interested in?

B: Oh, I knew I could. I knew when, it was, there was always plenty of work around [me]. Uh, I mean you might [net] not be able to get (- -)

[end of tape]